Famous Artists Painting Course
Famous Artists Schools, Inc., Westport, Connecticut

Section **7**

Advanced pictorial composition

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The meaning of this section is well summed up in this painting. In it Norman Rockwell gives us far more than accurate drawing and good composition — he communicates feeling. Emotion, strongly felt and sensitively expressed, gives greater impact and conviction to any picture.

Advanced pictorial composition

The history of success in art is the history of men and women who were able to project their feelings into their paintings – to make pictures that were a record not only of things seen but also of things felt. The Spanish artist Goya, for example, long ago made paintings and etchings of war and its gruesome carnage which mirrored his profound feelings of horror so faithfully that these pictures still move us deeply today. The great paintings of Christ by El Greco, Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, and other old masters are far more than reverent pictures of a religious subject – they are made luminous and holy by the extraordinary feeling with which the artists painted them. Standing before a picture by Vincent van Gogh – whether it be a portrait of a French peasant with baleful, hypnotic eyes, or a picture of a night sky in which each star is a whirling, incandescent storm and each tree a strangely mobile, passionate shape – we cannot help but respond to the burning emotion that the artist experienced for his subjects. All of these pictures have deeper meaning for us because of the feeling the artist poured into them.

Feeling makes the picture

A painting is not really a creative act until the personal taste, the technical skills, and the emotional responses of the artist enter into it. In any painting of real value, what the artist has felt is just as important as, if not more important than, what he saw. A painting is the embodiment of the artist's visual and emotional experience – an attempt to set down that experience in such an interesting way that other people can experience it, too. Composition is the process by which the artist gets this experience across, using simple, commonsense procedures of arrangement and organization to tell his story effectively.

Let's see how a painting comes into being. Suppose, for example, that you are out driving on a cloudy, windy day. You turn onto a road near the shore. You have driven along this road dozens of times before, without having been particularly impressed by the scene. Today, however, it is different. Large billowing storm clouds tower up over the horizon. The trees, which usually command little attention, are moving wildly in the wind. The water is being whipped up into whitecaps. The colors, bright on a sunny day, are now grayed and subdued. Everything says "storm." You feel a sudden emotion of awe and excitement – a reaction of mingled respect and humility that all living things feel in the aroused presence of nature. This is an emotion worth recording; here is a subject worth painting.

As you sit quietly in the car studying the scene, preparing to get down your impressions in a sketch, you realize that there are many things in the subject as you see it that have nothing to do with telling the story. Those buildings that hide much of the water and the horizon, the cars parked mutely in front of them, and the telephone poles are all unmoved, unfeeling, unaware of what is taking place around them. A photograph of the scene would record them, but in a painting they might detract from the impact of the storm.

In composing the picture to tell the story of the approaching storm as you felt it you would have to minimize or leave out many of these unimportant forms. You might, for example, omit all but one of the cars, and show this lonely vehicle being battered by the wind. Or you might concentrate on the trees, the clouds, the water, and make these moving, expressive forms dominate your sketch. Try to paint your forms so effectively that anyone looking at the picture will feel the force of the wind, hear its sound as it rushes by, marvel at the beauty and the terrible dignity of nature. Remember that when friends look at this picture on the wall they will not be experiencing the sensations that are part of your reaction at this time. You must therefore use the same kind of selection and emphasis in telling this picture story that you would if you were describing the scene in words. All your experiences as you watch this scene – experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling – must be summed up in this single visual statement. If you paint with this strong desire to communicate your sensations as effectively as possible, the trees will move, the whitecaps will break, the clouds will tower overhead. You will be capturing your total reaction.

No matter what subject you are painting, begin by asking yourself, "What makes me react to this?" Get to the heart of the matter. Dig out the important facts – and make them more important, or more exciting, by leaving out every irrelevant detail. Play up the qualities that have impressed you. This is what composing a picture is all about: it means that you arrange significant elements in the picture so that they make as effective as possible a communication to the viewer.

Communicating feeling

As artists, we must remember that nothing – people, places, or things – is without its feeling or its atmosphere. Everything arouses a response of some kind within us, and suggesting this response in our picture will make it more expressive and believable. The solitude of a lonely lake, the gentle lapping of waves against the shore, the piercing cry of gulls – there are ways of evoking all these things in a picture, as we shall learn in this section. The jostling of a big-city crowd, the roar of motors, the squeal of brakes, the smell of fire, or the delicate fragrance of a flower – there are ways of capturing or communicating all these sensations in a drawing or painting.

To show feeling in a picture is, in part, a matter of technical skill. The smooth or rough way we apply our paints or pen strokes, the darkness or lightness of our values, the softness or crispness of edges, the harmony or clash of colors – all of these things can help us communicate feeling more directly.

To compose our pictures effectively also requires knowledge. We must learn, through study and trial and error, how to arrange forms in the picture area, how to use directional line to group these forms and lead the viewer's attention to the center of interest, how to use value to emphasize the important and subdue the unimportant. To do all of these things takes real experience and a knowledge of the "rules" – but it takes sensitivity as well. At any point in the making of a picture, feeling – the feeling of the artist for his subject, for his medium, and for the emotions and attitudes of the public, which he wants to influence – is of fundamental importance.

So it takes something more, added to technical skill in drawing and a sound knowledge of composition, to succeed as a real artist. The artist must respond to his picture subject physically and emotionally. He must reach out for it with all his senses – touch, scent, hearing, perhaps even taste – and show in his picture what his senses have discovered. He must reach out for his subject with his inner feelings, too – and make his picture reveal to the viewer what the subject means to him in emotional terms. He must make the viewer feel what he has felt.

Only if the artist can project his sense impressions and his emotions into his work will he be able to give it the personal quality, sensitivity, and human feeling that have marked the best and greatest pictures of yesterday and today.

As human beings, we react to the world around us and to our picture subjects with all of our senses, with a multitude of emotional associations and feelings, with our whole being. As artists, we must catch up these feelings – weave them sensitively into our composition, into our forms, our values, and lines – so that the viewer, looking at our pictures, will find in them images that are deeply convincing and meaningful because they are painted with emotional truth.

The symbol and the picture

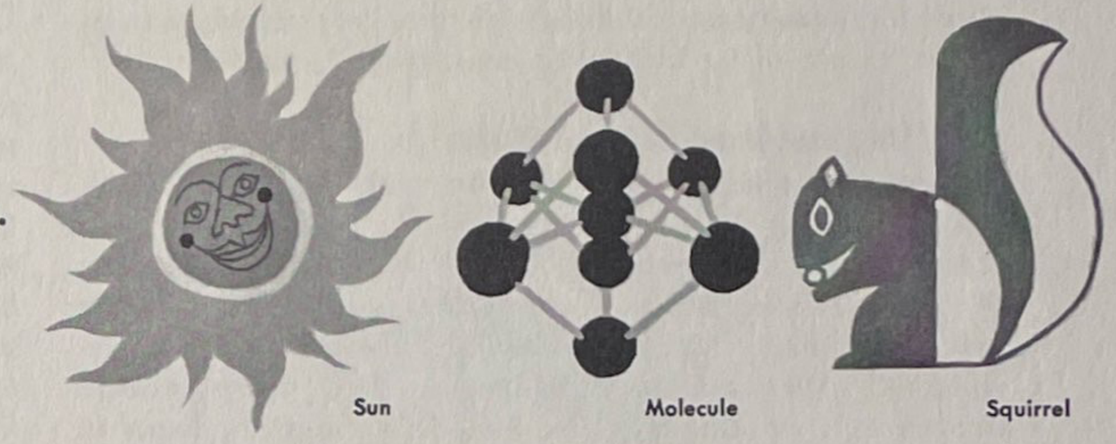
The main purpose of our pictures is to communicate. We have something we want to show to people — an idea, a situation, an emotion, a mood, an effect of color, a group of textures. A picture may be many different things, but primarily it is a pictorial message that the artist delivers to the viewer.

One of the most useful and effective ways to deliver our message is by means of a symbol. We are all thoroughly familiar with symbols. Gangling, bearded Uncle Sam, in his striped trousers, is a symbol of the United States — a pile of coins is a symbol of wealth or money — a six-shooter in a holster is a symbol of a western movie or story. Symbols surround us in just about every sphere of life.

The symbol is a quick, easy means of conveying an idea which is sometimes large and complicated. We might think of the symbol as a sort of a shorthand for the larger thing it represents. Symbols are a quick bridge between people's sight and their understanding. Because symbols are so familiar and meaningful to all of us, they have great value to the artist in making pictures. This value isn't confined just to the ordinary use of a symbol as a symbol. Artistically, its most effective use is as an underlying theme or design for the picture.

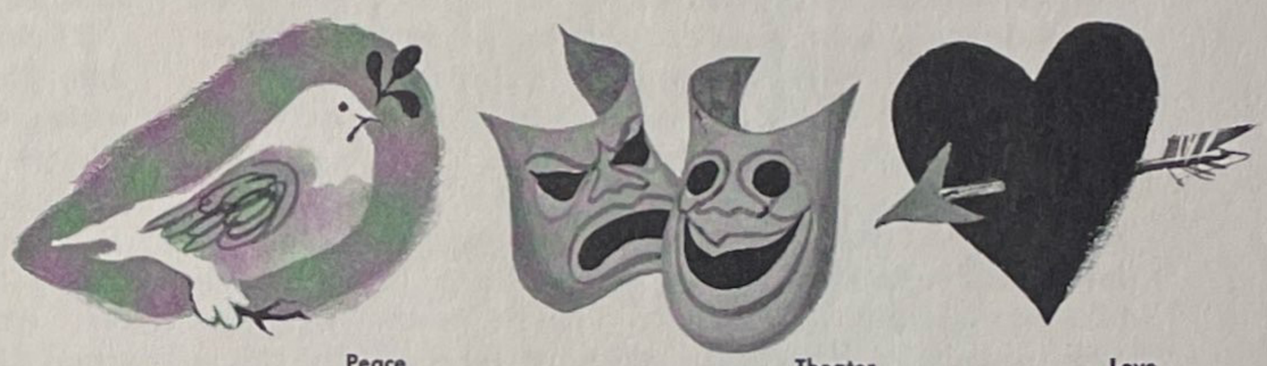
With these thoughts in mind, let's study the symbol in broad terms and see how it works in relation to composing the whole picture.

There are symbols which stand for the things themselves.



Sun Molecule Squirrel

There are symbols which represent other things.



Peace Theater Love

Some symbols describe feelings.

Sensuous Dramatic Happy

Light and dark are symbols, too.

Values express moods ranging from gaiety to gloom.

As the drawings above suggest, the first and most basic type of symbol is just a simplified version of an object. Here the symbol represents the object itself. Examples are the sun, the structure of a molecule, and the squirrel.

In the second group we can place the symbols which stand for other things or ideas. Examples are the dove of peace, the masks of tragedy or comedy, which represent the theater, and the heart, signifying love.

Another group are the symbols that describe feelings. The soft, flowing curve depicts sensuousness or rest. Explosive lines suggest drama and radiant, raylike lines symbolize cheer.

The tones of light and dark which we have represented here by a value bar are also important symbols. We've touched on value before, but in this section we will consider light and dark tones mainly as they suggest moods — ranging from light (happy) through gray (dull or sad) to black (gloomy or mysterious).

Using symbols in different ways

CELESTINO PIATTI
Courtesy Graphis Press

Rooster

MARIA-BILJAN BILGER
Courtesy Graphis Press

Cogwheel

Direct symbol

Here are two examples that fit into our group of symbols which stand for the thing itself. They are used singly and are highly stylized versions of the real object. Still, each symbol tells the whole story — it communicates quick, direct meaning to the viewer.

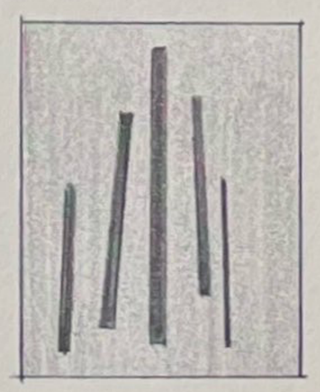
Symbolical

Here are realistic figures used in combination with symbols, which form a kind of background. Al Parker made this nostalgic illustration for a story about a boy who idolized his not-too-bright uncle. The uncle was a jack-of-all-trades, and the many different objects symbolize his background and versatility. For example, the rifle, rabbits, and mounted squirrel tell us that he is a skillful hunter, the fireman's hat that he is a fireman, and the revolver and handcuffs that he is a constable. The symbols are drawn merely as outlines in order to show that they are symbols and exist only in the mind of the boy.

Courtesy Cosmopolitan

Underlying symbolism

This world-famous painting is Norman Rockwell's conception of freedom of speech, one of the Rights of Man. Rockwell has carefully patterned his main character on the vertical symbol of dignity, which is especially appropriate for this important subject. The artist has arranged the secondary figures so that they are all looking up at the main one, thus emphasizing his stature. To increase the sense of verticality, Rockwell has kept the background behind this figure clear and uncluttered. If he were standing in a somewhat casual position, the feeling of dignity would be completely missing. Always keep mood symbols in mind when you compose a picture.



© Curtis Publishing Co. 1943

BEN SHAHN
Hamlet

Courtesy CBS TV

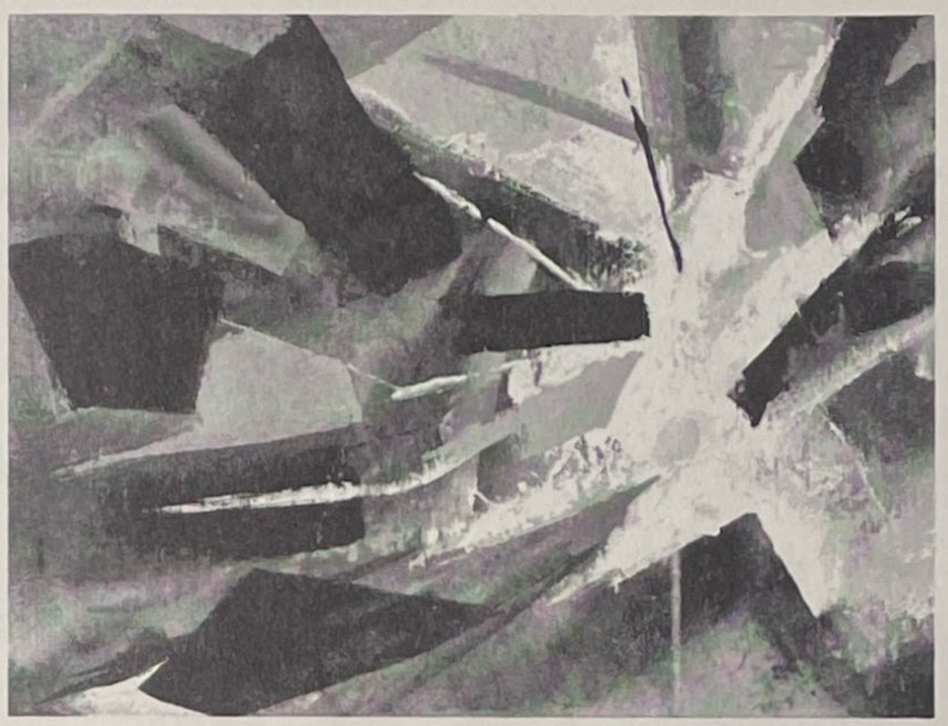
Communicating feeling in a picture

Most people suppose that the artist draws or paints just the appearance of his subject. The best artists, however, do more than that. They re-create the feeling of the subject as well. This emphasis on feeling is at the core of a whole school of painting which is very influential today – the expressionist school. The artists who belong to this group are chiefly concerned with putting down a record of their feelings or attitudes toward their subjects. Naturally, as artists who must keep an audience in mind, we will not go this far – but we will consider how to use feeling to make our pictures more expressive and convincing to others.

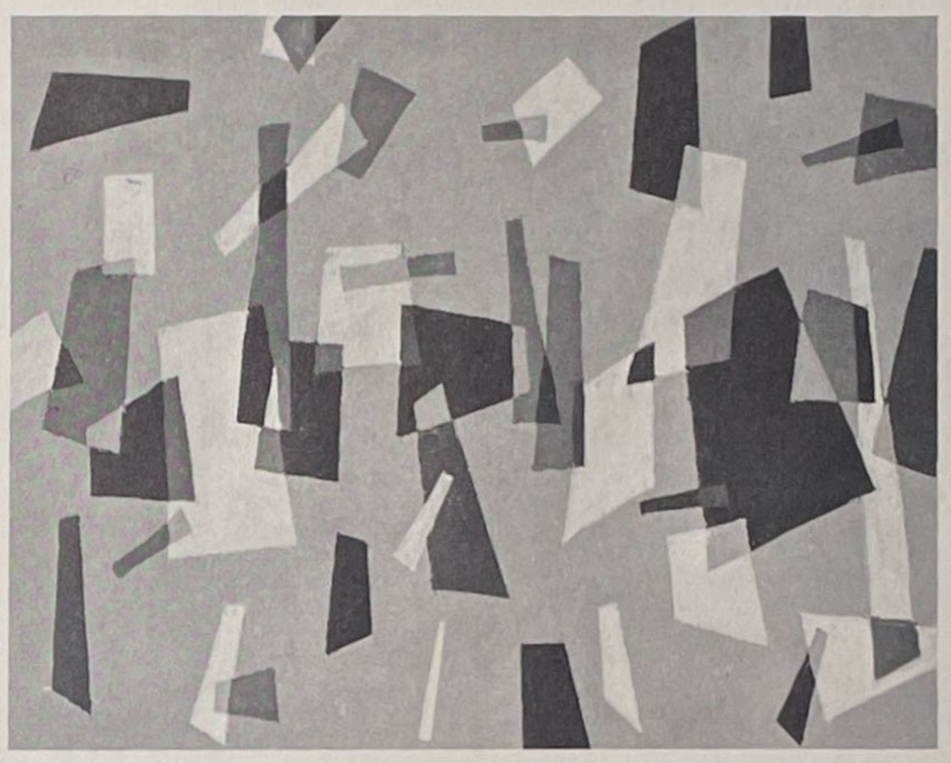
The total impression

When we look out at the world – look at the things around us which we plan to put into a picture – we do more than simply see them as a camera would. We experience the subject with all of our senses – with our senses of hearing, scent, touch. From the things our senses tell us we get a certain feeling about the subject, a total impression. For example, the subject may have not just the look, but also the feeling, of fragility or strength, grace or clumsiness. It is this total impression that we must try to get into our picture.

In the following pages we will consider how these sensations or feelings can be translated into visual terms – how they can be put down with pencil, pen, or brush. The effect of these feelings is important because it can add a really professional quality to our work. In fact, a picture which might be accurately drawn and reasonably well composed could still fail to communicate to the viewer or stir an emotion in him unless it did contain this very thing we are speaking of – the sense of the subject as well as its appearance.



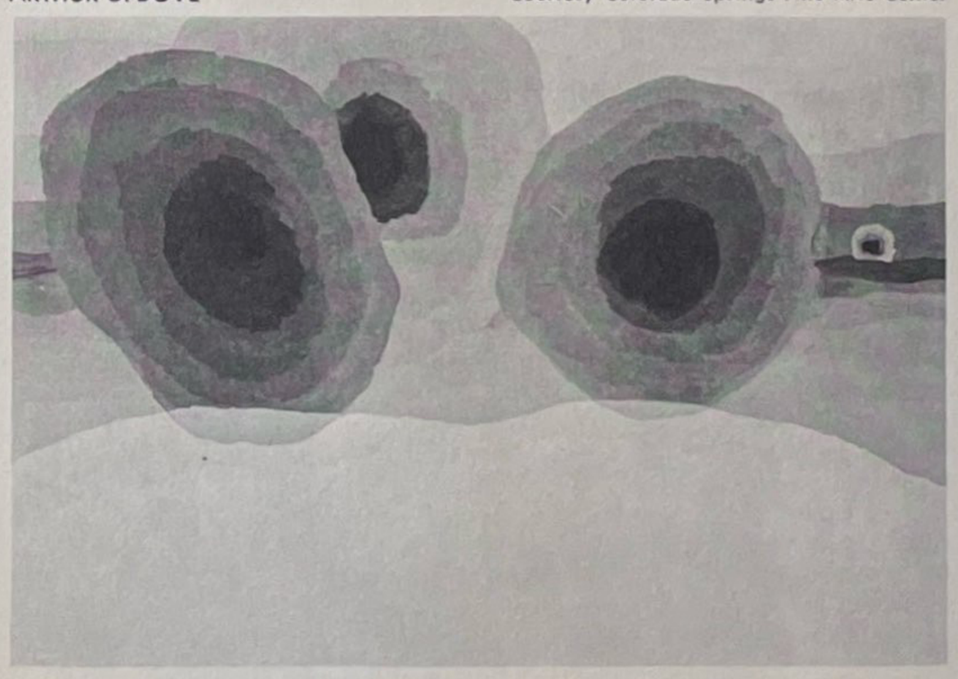
Explosive: This picture was made to suggest an atomic explosion. It gives us a feeling of tremendous blast and concussion.



Tinkling: Thin, brittle shapes have been carefully arranged in the picture space to suggest a sound of tinkling.

ARTHUR G. DOVE

Courtesy Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center



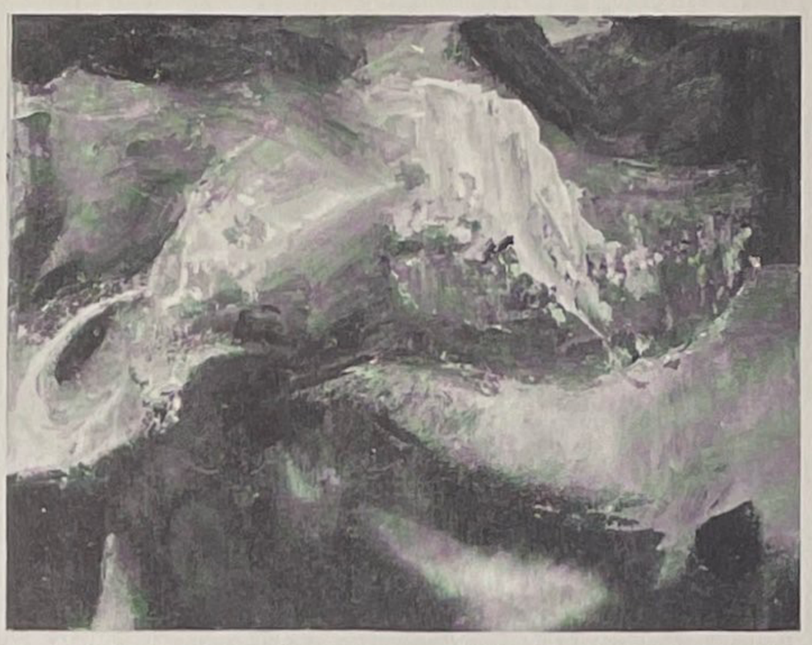
Foghorns: There is a feeling of depth to these forms – one that strongly suggests the loud, hoarse voices of foghorns.

At the same time that we search for the feeling of a subject, we must also be aware that our own inner feelings are equally important – that they in turn determine how the subject affects us.

All of us, far from being impersonal machines, are, more accurately speaking, tangled bundles of nerves, sensitivities, desires, prejudices, hopes, fears, aspirations, affections, memories. Our eyes communicate the outside world to us more or less efficiently. But we can never look at any object without finding that a jangled chain of emotional and mental reactions has been set up inside us. Many of these reactions occur so deep within us that we are hardly conscious of them. Nevertheless, our attitude toward what we see is governed as much by what we bring to the object as by what the object brings to us. It is almost impossible to be completely detached and impersonal. Our underlying feelings project a definite mood over our surroundings, and at different times will make the same subject look good, bad, or indifferent to us. Our sympathy for the subject, our love or hatred for it – our attitude toward it – can sharpen our senses and help us wring everything we possibly can from it.

To create a truly expressive picture, the artist must be aware of all these things, both in himself and in his subject. Only then can he really focus on what is before him and see it as an artist – with an intense, unique appreciation that enables him to select what is special and discard what is not – to record his subject personally and creatively and communicate it to others.

As a first step toward learning how to transfer the feel of something to the surface of our picture, let's examine the paintings on these two pages. Each expresses a sound or a fundamental feeling in visual form. Most of these pictures are immediate and natural mind-and-hand reactions, almost as direct and basic as laughing or crying. As you look at each picture, ask yourself what it suggests to you. The great likelihood is that your reaction will be close to the one the painter was trying to produce. These illustrations prove that feelings can really be put down in pictures.



An ominous feeling

Excitement

A nervous feeling

Mystery, gloom — low key | Classic dignity — awesome | Despairing, sad — depressed | Excited, frivolous, hysterical | Calm, silent, peaceful | Hopeful, happy, glad | Soft, gentle, rhythmic

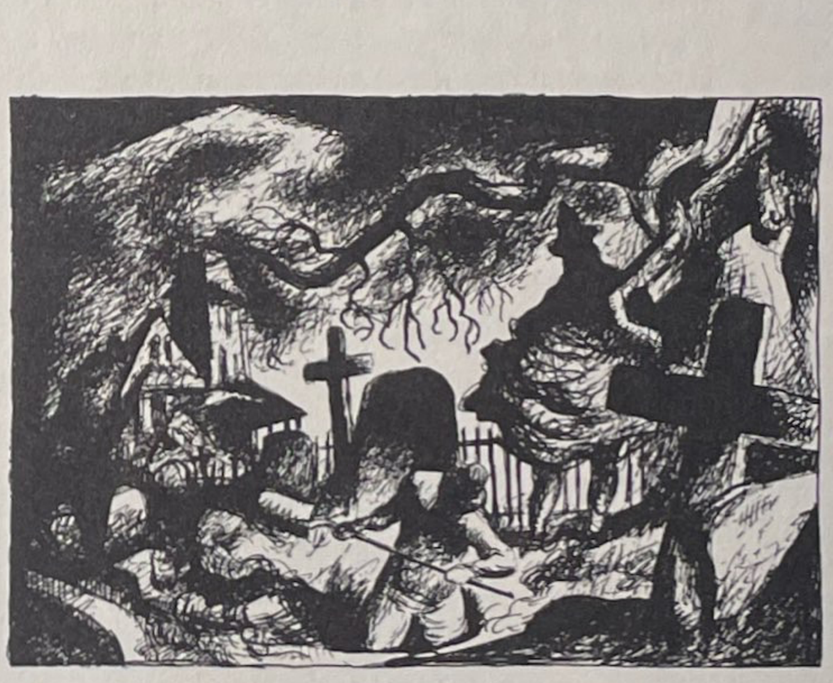
Despair—silence, gloom: In the accompanying text I have explained the elements which make this picture look unhappy. I would suggest that you look around you and see how many of these mood symbols you yourself can find — there are, literally, hundreds of them, with many variations.

Mood in composition — Stahl

Above are a few of the basic symbols that may be used to establish the mood or feeling of a picture. Many other elements besides these symbols are important in establishing a picture's mood. Color, tone, edges, the composition and the objects represented all contribute to a picture's mood. But the basic symbols shown here are starting points, and the effect they create in various mood pictures is easily seen and felt.

A number of these mood symbols may be combined in a single picture. An example of this can be found at left in the sketch called "Despair," in which we have the drooping forms of despair and sadness combined with the symbol of mystery or gloom. These symbols can add to and heighten the story told by the action of the figure or figures in a painting. The symbols establish the mood; the action, locale, and props tell the immediate story.

The diagrams above are not to be used like a chart. If you try to do this, you will become mechanical in your feeling toward mood. These symbols are merely a breakdown of the elements that create mood. When I make a picture, first I feel the mood I want to present and then, through feeling and technique, I re-create that mood in the picture space with the aid of these symbols.



Mystery—gloom, excitement: Besides containing various mood symbols, this drawing has an array of strange and weird shapes that wriggle and squirm in a revolting way. The scene, which shows grave robbers at work, demonstrates how one can use props in a picture to make more of the basic symbols. For example, the tree branches seem like clutching hands reaching down into the half-opened grave. Due to their wriggling nature, the branches appear to be moving, to be alive. In mysterious pictures of this sort the use of a black silhouette against light is tremendously effective.

Sensuous—gentle, soft: Naturally, the subject matter of an intimate picture has much to do with the creation of an intimate mood. It is also necessary to use symbols of intimacy in connection with the subject matter in order to communicate the mood more quickly to the viewer. Here the mood is intimate and warm, and therefore all the forms must be soft and yielding except those few necessary straight and angular forms used for contrast. Soft, round forms appear softer and rounder when placed with angular forms.

Excitement—mystery, hysteria: To attain this mood of excitement and hysteria we renounce any suggestion of order in a formal sense. Of course everything is really organized, but in a loose and pliable way. We find very few horizontals and verticals. Things appear jumbled and tossed around like straws in the wind. The forms squirm and twist. The element of mystery (dark) is used to weave wild, jagged patterns around the figures.

Calm, holy—dignified, silent: The calm serenity of this pen drawing is based on two mood symbols — the horizontal line and the vertical line. The horizontal indicates calmness, the vertical indicates dignity and greatness. All these meanings for the vertical and horizontal lines combine and contribute to a feeling of holiness in this picture.

Drama—mystery, excitement: In the case of the dramatic picture we must be careful not to carry things too far. Such a mistake will occur if we show our figures in gestures that are not logical. However, a facial expression can be exaggerated (things must be exaggerated) up to a point and still be in good taste. In fact, let your taste guide your exaggeration. You don't have to worry about exaggerating mood symbols, of course. They can be exaggerated extremely and still be sound. Note how the broken effect of light through the railing creates vibrant excitement and adds to the action of the figures. A picture is a dead thing unless we give it life and movement by the use of forms that throb and live.

Hope—brightness, excitement: Here I have combined the symbol for hope (happy, bright) with the symbol for excitement to create this mood. Notice that the arms of the larger figure repeat the rising lines of the sunrise symbol in the background.

CLAUDE MONET
Rouen Cathedral
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.
Chester Dale Collection

Feeling and mood through value

All of us have basic reactions to tones of light and dark. These reactions are deep rooted. A small child fears the dark — it suggests mystery, the unknown to him. By contrast, a bright, sunny day, in which everything is perfectly visible, dissolves any feeling of fear or mystery. Because light is the condition in which we feel most at ease, we associate it with cheerfulness and gaiety.

A middle or gray tone is another thing again. The soft, muted tones of a wet, foggy day, subduing color and value contrasts, create in us a quiet mood — a mood of tranquility, mystery, depression, sorrow, or boredom.

Since these are <u>real</u> responses to nature's changing tones, the artist can count on similar responses when he makes appropriate uses of these tones in his pictures. Lightness, grayness, and darkness are among the most effective of symbols. Shades of value create shades of meaning and rank among our most potent compositional tools.

Light and airy: In this sun-drenched painting, Monet has skillfully used his knowledge of value to express the mood he desired. The dominant value key is high and gives the picture a remarkable quality of lightness and airiness. The only dark areas are the shadows — and even these are not very dark.

FRANCISCO GOYA
The Shootings of May 3, 1808
Museo del Prado, Madrid

Dramatic light and shade: Part of the effect of this horrifying scene of man's inhumanity to man is achieved through Goya's use of dramatic contrast. Note how the brilliant unreal lights seem to explode against the dark background. An explosive symbol of action and excitement is created by the angular shapes of the firing squad and their rifles and the form of the man in the white shirt. Surrounding forms and lines, particularly that of the hillside, support this symbol.

HONORÉ DAUMIER
The Refugees
Musee du Petit Palais, Paris

Dark and depressing: Forms are huddled together and heads are bowed and faceless — it's almost as though they were wearing hoods — in Daumier's haunting painting of refugees on the march. The overall value effect is dark and dramatic. A mood of despair and melancholy surrounds everything.

CLAUDE MONET
Sailing Boat at Argenteuil

Middle key: Although there are areas of brightness in this painting, a middle key dominates, helping to create the quiet mood of dusk. The horizontal lines of the boat and horizon, the horizontal streaks in the sky and reflections in the water, and the strong verticals of the masts provide symbols of calm and restfulness appropriate to the subject.

Sharp, exciting contrasts: In this picture of the climactic moment in a whale hunt the mood is heightened by powerful contrasts of dark and light. The huge dark form of the whale vies for our attention with the puny figures of the men in the boat, and the action of both whale and men is made more dramatic by the swirling white foam that surrounds them. Particularly noteworthy is the strong diagonal placement of the whale and the boat, creating a zigzag symbol of excitement which is emphasized by the foam.

BEN STAHL
The Whalers

Courtesy John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Co.

"It's rough and heavy — it feels like a pineapple"

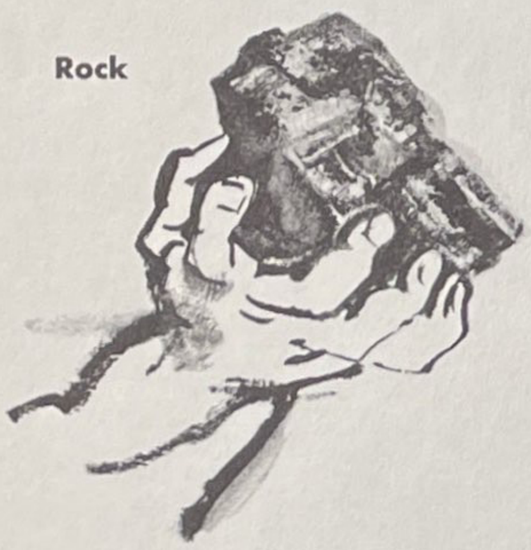
Touch — the feel and weight of things

The photograph at the right highlights the importance of our sense of touch. Thanks to this sense we are able to recognize objects when we cannot see them — or to know them better when we do see them. If we can carry over into our pictures a strong sense of the texture of things — not only of the way they look but of the way they feel — our pictures will be all the more convincing for it.

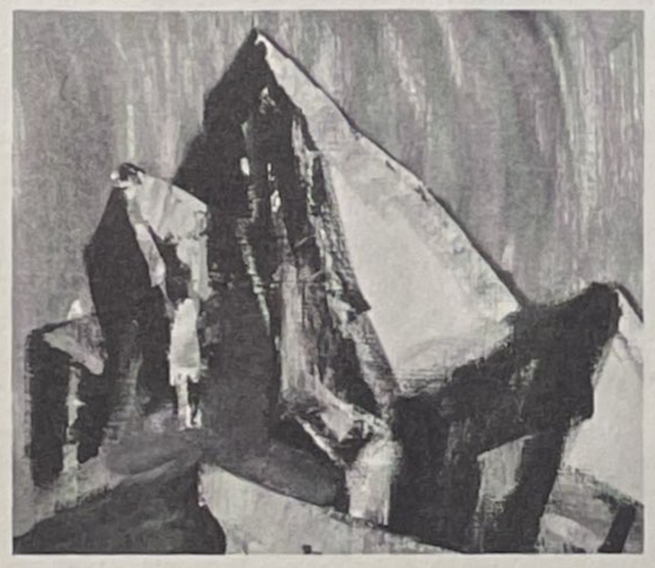
To draw or paint an object well, we must be as familiar as possible with every aspect of it. This means, if practicable, picking the thing up, running one's hand over it, getting a sharp impression of the weight and feel of it. Then, when we take up pen or brush, we must try to re-create this feeling in the picture. We can do this best if we emphasize the specific character of the surface — if we make sure that the rough bark of a tree really appears rough, if we show the fluffy fur of a long-haired kitten as really soft and fluffy.

After we have painted an object or a texture as well as possible, it is important to sit back and look at it, and ask: Does that really convey the rugged hardness of bark? Does this mite of a kitten really look as though it would feel soft and silky and light in the hand? Our pictures should capture these qualities of texture and weight regardless of how accurately we draw the details of the form.

Rock

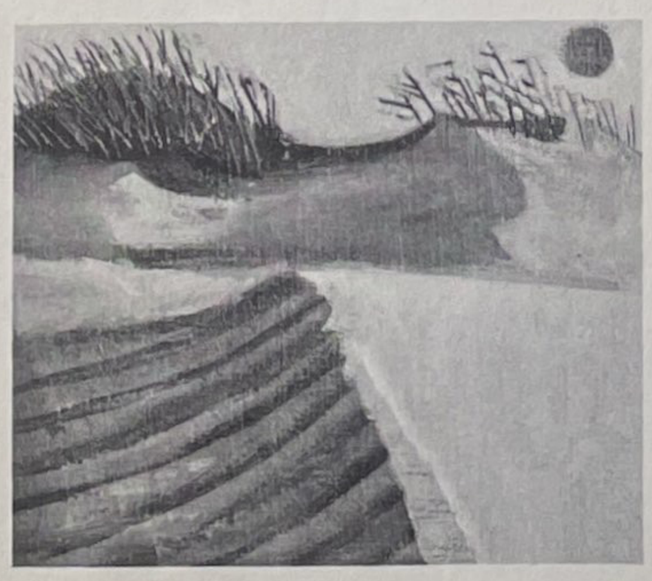


Rugged, hard, solid: When we hold a rock in our hands, we experience its solid, heavy, dense form, its sharp or smooth contours and its weight. Rock is rock — there is no mistaking it for another material. In painting rock, we must think of this feeling of density and hardness and try to re-create it, whether the object is a small stone, as above, or distant mountains, like those below.



Sand

Shifting, granular, smooth: When we pick up a handful of sand and sift it through our fingers, we are made sharply aware of its flexible, smooth, granular qualities. This sense impression has bearing even if we are painting a desert or a stretch of beach, as below. The picture should convey the soft, shifting character of sand — it should not have the feel of grass or rock.



Water

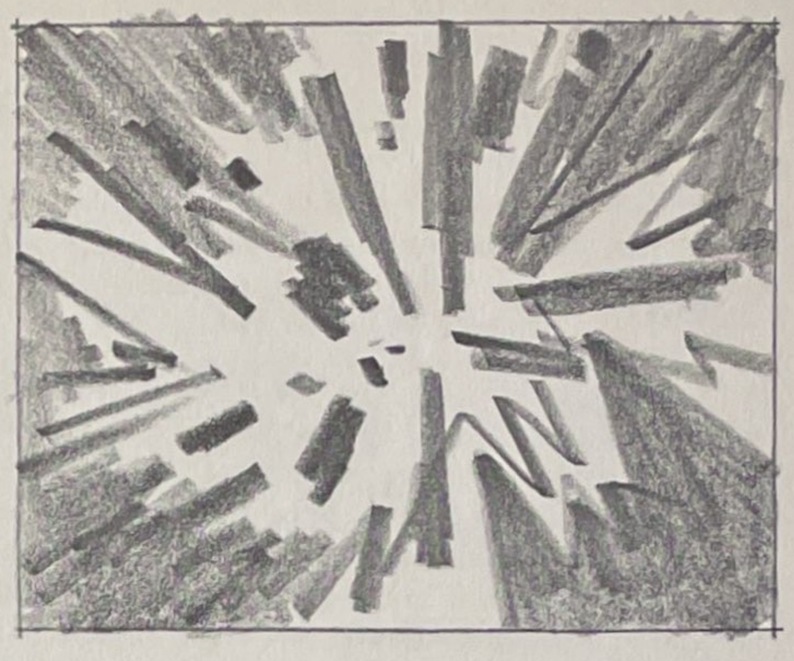
Flowing, liquid, buoyant: Our picture may show a hand testing the temperature of water or it may show a seascape of restless waves — but in each case the basic material is the same. Water is buoyant and liquid and these are the qualities we must try to paint. Here it is often helpful to think of opposites — of the wetness of the water as opposed to the dryness of sand.

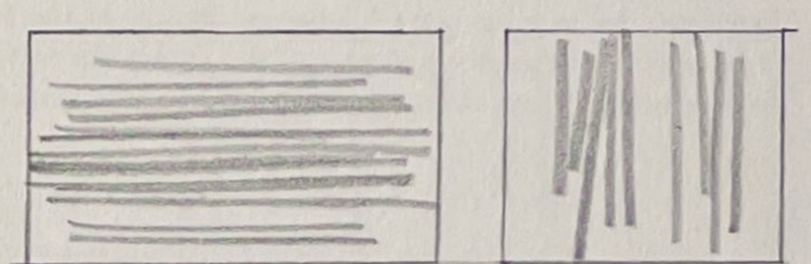
The effect of sound

Long before there were motion pictures with sound, artists were painting pictures that communicated the sensation of sound. We have already seen some examples of how this can be done. At the right there is another, a picture of an explosion, in which a series of coarse, heavy, radiating lines strongly suggest an ear-splitting, shattering noise. Compare these lines with the horizontal and vertical ones of the diagrams below this picture. In the diagrams the effect is quiet or static.

We can apply this principle very successfully in pictures of many different kinds. The impact of sound can be suggested by the angularity and the diagonal quality of the shapes and lines. The effect of quiet is best conveyed by stressing horizontal lines — lines that are quiet, that literally "lie down" — or vertical lines, or a combination of both. Tone can play a part, too. Strong contrasts of light and dark will suggest violent sound, but closely matched values will create a quiet mood.

Carrying sense impressions, such as sound, over into your painting may seem a bit difficult at first. With practice and concentration, however, you can have surprising success. Whenever you draw or paint a picture, think of the sound elements that are present. Try, for example, to "visualize" the noise and tumult of a crowd as opposed to the quiet of a millpond.



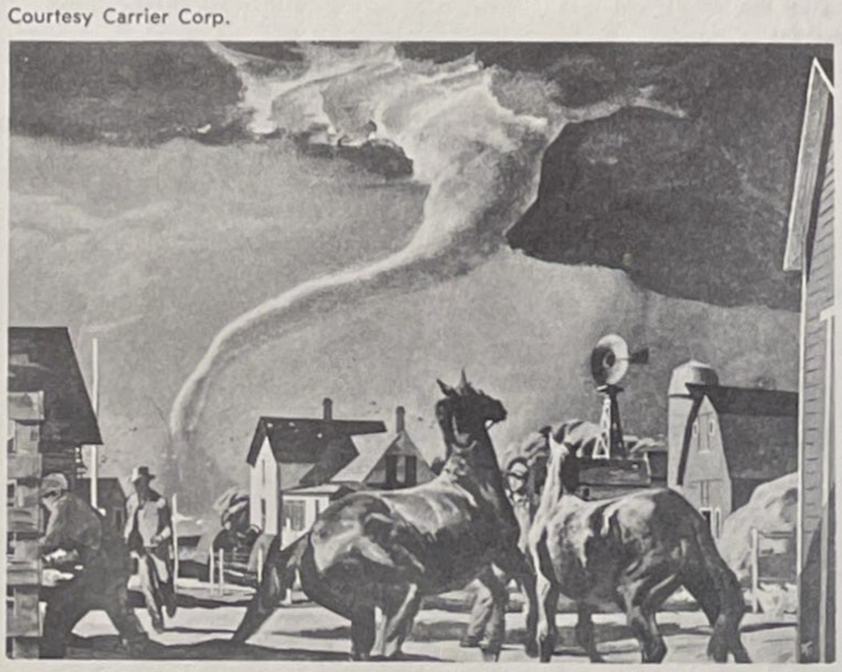


This scene in Wall Street, like the Fawcett picture below, suggests movement and noise. The many different forms and the different directions in which they are moving help to give us a sense of the sounds of people hurrying and the noise of traffic as we experience them in a busy street.

Courtesy Ewing Galloway

Here is the same Wall Street scene on a Sunday morning. There is almost a tomblike quality to the deserted streets and buildings. These two photographs give solid proof that the feeling of sound or silence can be communicated very clearly through visual means.

Courtesy Carrier Corp.



Robert Fawcett's painting of an approaching tornado and Al Parker's picture of a quiet lake offer an extreme contrast in the sounds they suggest. Fawcett has successfully created a feeling of activity and noise — we can almost hear the terror-stricken whinny of the horses, the running sound and shouting of the men, and the howling of the wind as the mighty tornado moves in for its strike.

Parker's lake scene, on the other hand, is completely muted. Even the oars out of water help to emphasize the feeling of silence. To strengthen it, the artist has used very few diagonals or strong, contrasting tones.

© Curtis Publishing Co. 1946

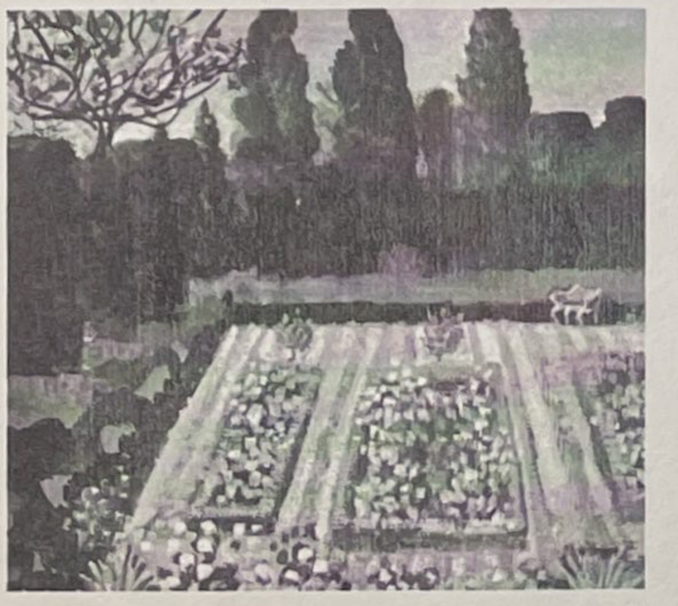
Scent

At first this sense might seem far removed from any practical role in making a picture. But, as the illustrations below suggest, the sense of smell enters very strongly into our experiences – and into re-creating them for others to see. Some of our most vivid memories are associated with odors – the pleasant odor of a newly mown field of hay, the fresh, sweet smell of the earth at the end of a summer's shower, the scent of pine in a forest, of burning logs in a campfire, of bacon sizzling in the frying pan. The odor of these things is part of the things themselves, and it is very much a part of our feeling and attitude toward them.

Being aware of the odor of things – whether it is harsh or pleasant, strong or gentle – can help us to interpret them sensitively and convincingly. We will paint roses more delicately if we think of their perfume, and a city dump more realistically if we remember how it smells. The opposite is also true. For example, without the awareness that the smoke that pours from a burning building is acrid and choking, an artist might paint this effect in colors and values that would strike a false note. Keep scent in mind when you paint, and you will experience and re-create your subject with greater feeling.

Rose

Sweet, fragrant, delicate: A rose has a sweet, delicate perfume — and being mindful of this as we paint the flower can help us portray its personality. In making the painting below, the artist thought of the pleasant, rich fragrance of a whole garden of roses.



Fire and smoke

Pleasant or acrid: The smell of fire and smoke has different associations for us. A friendly campfire has a crisp, fresh smell that we associate with feelings of cheer — with warmth and food and fresh air. Very different is the frightening, acrid smell of a building on fire. In the picture below, our visual reaction to the fire is closely tied to our imagined sensation of how it must smell.

Garbage

Dank, musty, unpleasant: An overflowing garbage pail carries with it powerful and unpleasant associations of smell. Words like "stale," "rancid," "damp," and "rotting" come to mind in a very forceful way. We associate it with old basements, tenements, slum alleys, decay and poverty, as in the scene below. The artist who is painting a scene like this will rely strongly on the element of scent.

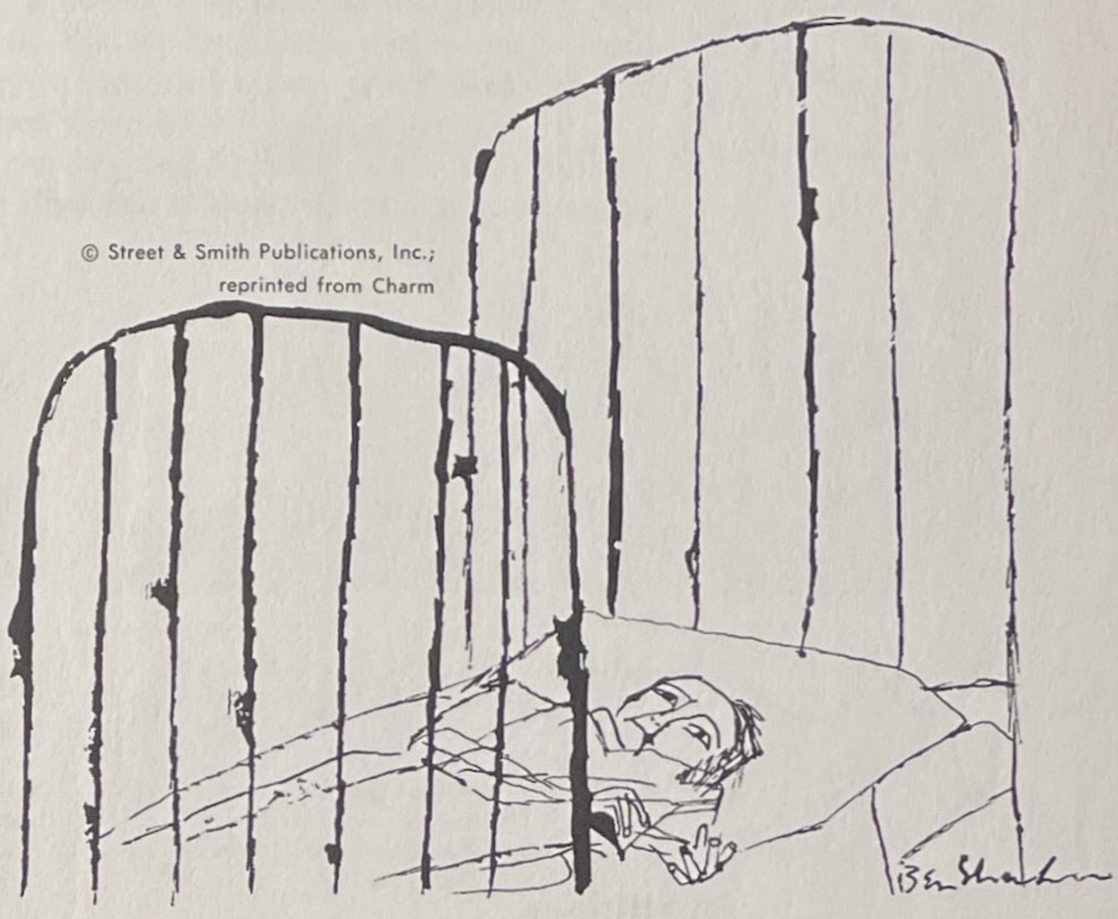
See — Observe — Remember

Courtesy Robert Blauner Collection, New York

Wild joy: The wild exaltation of the newly crowned champion and his trainer is powerfully presented in this picture by Fletcher Martin. The explosive design, with its strong contrasts of tone and its angular lines and shapes, is perfectly suited to the subject.

The feeling must be there

The pictures on this page, each by a different artist, vary greatly in subject, technique, and purpose. All, however, have one thing in common – they arouse an emotional response in us. This ability to communicate feeling is the mark of the successful picture. To put emotion into our art we cannot be indifferent to our subject – we must feel it with our senses, our mind and heart, our whole being. Only then can we communicate to the viewer the emotional richness and meaning of our living experience.



© Street & Smith Publications, Inc.; reprinted from Charm

Helplessness: This picture illustrates a line from a story: "She was lying there as an animal in a trap lies." Ben Shahn makes the bed overwhelming in size so that the bars tower over the helpless, frail figure and shut it in. Here is feeling, vividly expressed with the simplest of means — which are often the hardest to use well.

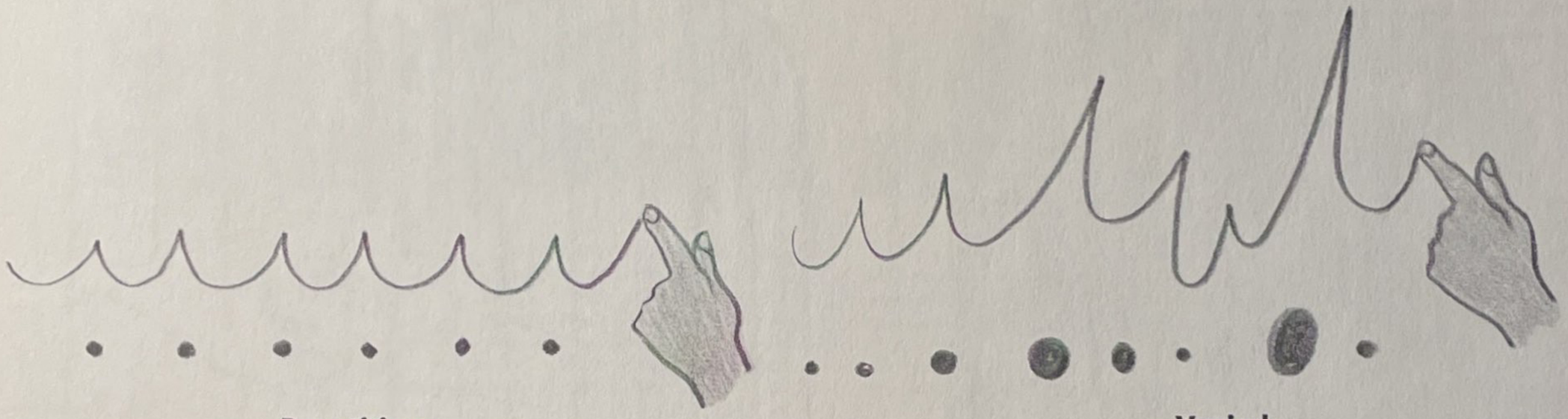
Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fatigue: In "The Washerwoman" Honoré Daumier has used the drooping symbol of fatigue or sorrow to express his compassion for this tired woman and her small child. Both figures are painted in dark tones to emphasize still further the grimness of their lot.

Gaiety: Here is a light, happy mood. The gay Maypole dancers, swirling ribbons, fluffy clouds, and blossoming tree — all of these convey a sense of springtime gaiety in this painting by Doris Lee.

Rhythm and design

Design means many things. In its simplest sense it means one, two, or three objects repeated over and over again – as in a pattern on wallpaper, linoleum, tile in a kitchen, drapes, or even a brick wall. These designs, however, are so simple and obvious that they would become quite monotonous in a picture. Unlike a wallpaper, whose repetitious design can be relieved by furniture placed against the wall, by a window opening, or a mirror, a picture must stand alone. When we speak of design in a picture, we are still speaking of elements that are rhythmically repeated. But it is not a dull, regular repetition – it is repetition with variation. In this variation lies the difference between an ordinary decorative design and the design of a picture. A good picture must be interesting, and variety of design is one of our chief tools in making it so.

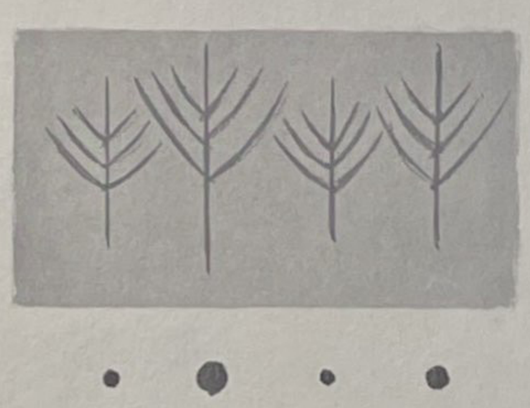


Repetitious **Varied**

An instinct of rhythm is basic in all of us. We tap our foot and keep time as we listen to a familiar piece of music. As we ride in a railroad train, the clickety-clack of the wheels on the rails is arranged into rhythms by our ear. The arts make use of this instinct for rhythm. The composer and the poet organize their tones or words into a regular, rhythmical flow of sound. And, in a similar way, the artist organizes the elements in his picture to create a rhythm. His rhythm, of course, must be appropriate for the effect he wants. Rhythms may be violent or quiet, smooth or staccato. Just as there is room for all types of rhythm in music, so there is room for an equal variety of rhythms in picture making. Once again the key to success is finding the answer to the question. What is most appropriate?

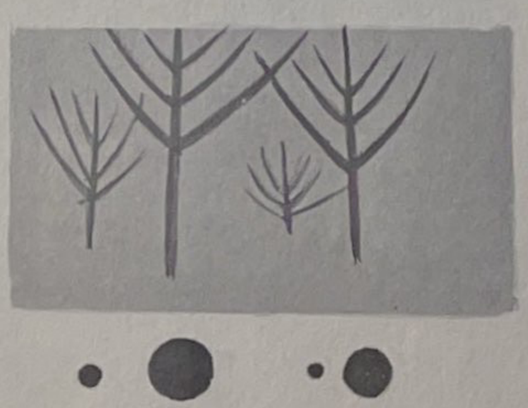
The diagrams and examples on this and the following page will give you a basis for answering this question by yourself. We will begin with the simple rhythms that are found in wallpaper and fabric designs – sheer repetition is the principle here – and then go on into variations, in which the range and meaning of the rhythm grows wider although the essential element of some similarity or repetition is not lost.

Here is a very simple wallpaper or fabric design. In it we see a single element repeated over and over monotonously. Such a design cannot hold our interest.



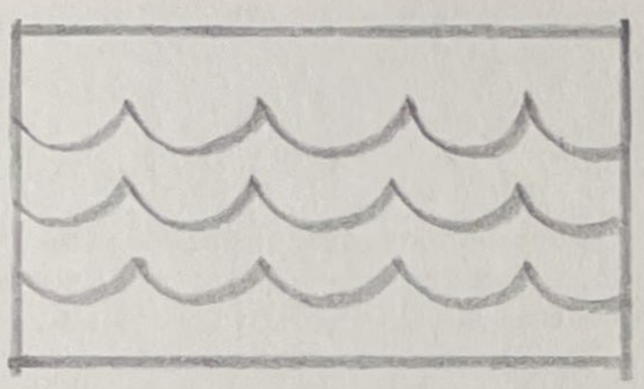
As soon as we vary two of these trees, we establish interest. Our eye stays with this simple diagram longer than with the first pattern. It's not exciting, but it's an improvement.

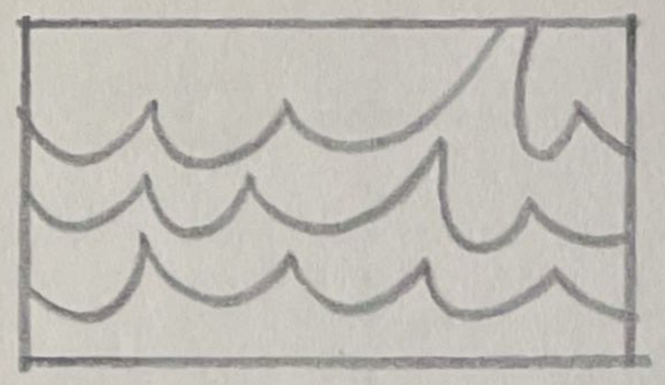
This design, with its even wider variety in the size of the similar elements, is still more interesting. New factors are the difference in the level of the trees and space intervals.



This one is even more varied. Some of the trees overlap and the interval between them is really changed. The rhythm is complicated and holds our attention longer.

Variety creates interest



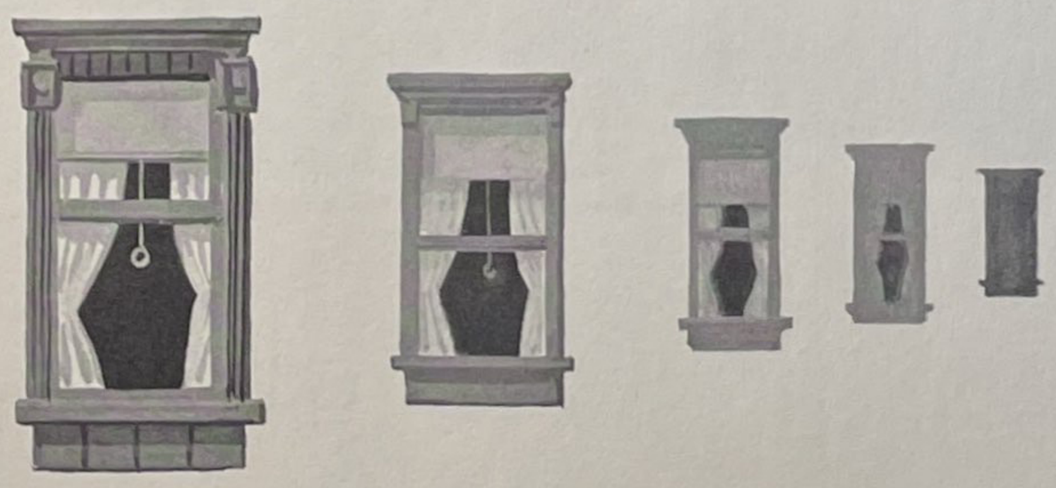


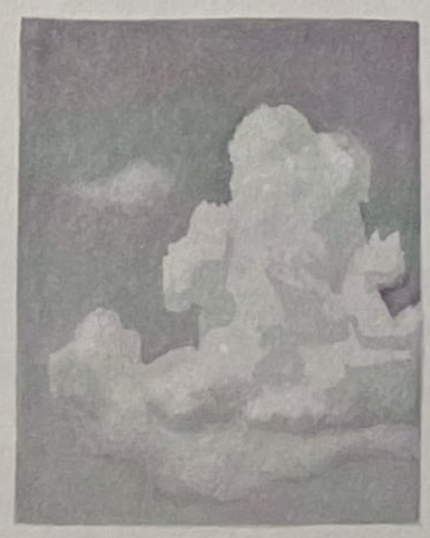
Complete, exact repetition in a picture is uninteresting no matter what subject we use. At the left, for example, are three houses and three trees that repeat each other exactly. Like the uniform waves above, they fail to hold our interest for very long. Monotonous forms like these would greatly handicap the effectiveness of any picture.

On the other hand, it doesn't take much to make this basic design more exciting. All that is required is the introduction of some variety — in the placement of the buildings, the size of the TV antennas, the size and shape of the trees. Like the irregular wave pattern at the right, the variations in interval and size hold our eye.

There are other ways of creating variety besides changes in size, shape, position and interval. Above, for example, are three windows of the same size. They might very well present a problem, so far as interest and variety are concerned, if we were faced with the job of drawing them in the front of a house. There is no need for monotony, though, if we keep in mind that there are variable elements within each of these windows. We don't have to draw all the shades at the same level, and drapes offer possibilities for change of shape as well as the amount of interior we see. Almost always opportunities like these exist in apparently monotonous subjects.

As the row of windows below demonstrates, variety and rhythm come naturally into play when we repeat elements at different depths. The change in size and the amount of detail — more detail in near objects, less in far ones — insures variety.





Overlapping offers still another way to create variety. There may be three clouds of similar size and shape in the sky or in our photographic or other reference material — but that doesn't bind us to put them in our picture sky. If anything, as artists, we are bound to keep such dull repetition out of our pictures. By overlapping we improve the design as shown above, and by varying the size and the amount of detail in each cloud, as shown at left, we help the design further.

You learn to draw by drawing

Mood in composition — HAROLD VON SCHMIDT

In this composition I wanted to create a mood of loneliness — of being alone with sun, air and space — when only the clouds seem to move — where the officer, though moving, was still the center of the world ringed around by flat horizons.

I tried to accomplish this by having the rider and animals move across the sweeping line of the clouds. I further opposed this movement by the road trace which crosses from the lower left to the lower right-hand edge of the picture and with the small dry wash that cuts across the lower left-hand corner. I wanted to keep the country barren so I animated the sky area with cloud shapes. These shapes are considered as carefully, as components of the composition, as was the figure group. Tone and color gave added depth and movement to them. The basic structure is shown in the accompanying diagram.

Notice that all major accents of line and tone point to the figure group. Note further that all major cloud shapes develop from a position above the rider's head. The strip of sky below the clouds joins with the line of the horizon to make a cross line with the rider, " 'x' marks the spot."

Converging lines hold the rider to a position in the canvas allowing the sweep of cloud movement to float to the right. This adds to the mood of spaciousness by slowing the movement of the figure group.

Observe how the long sweeping lines of the cloud movement turn your eye back into the picture.

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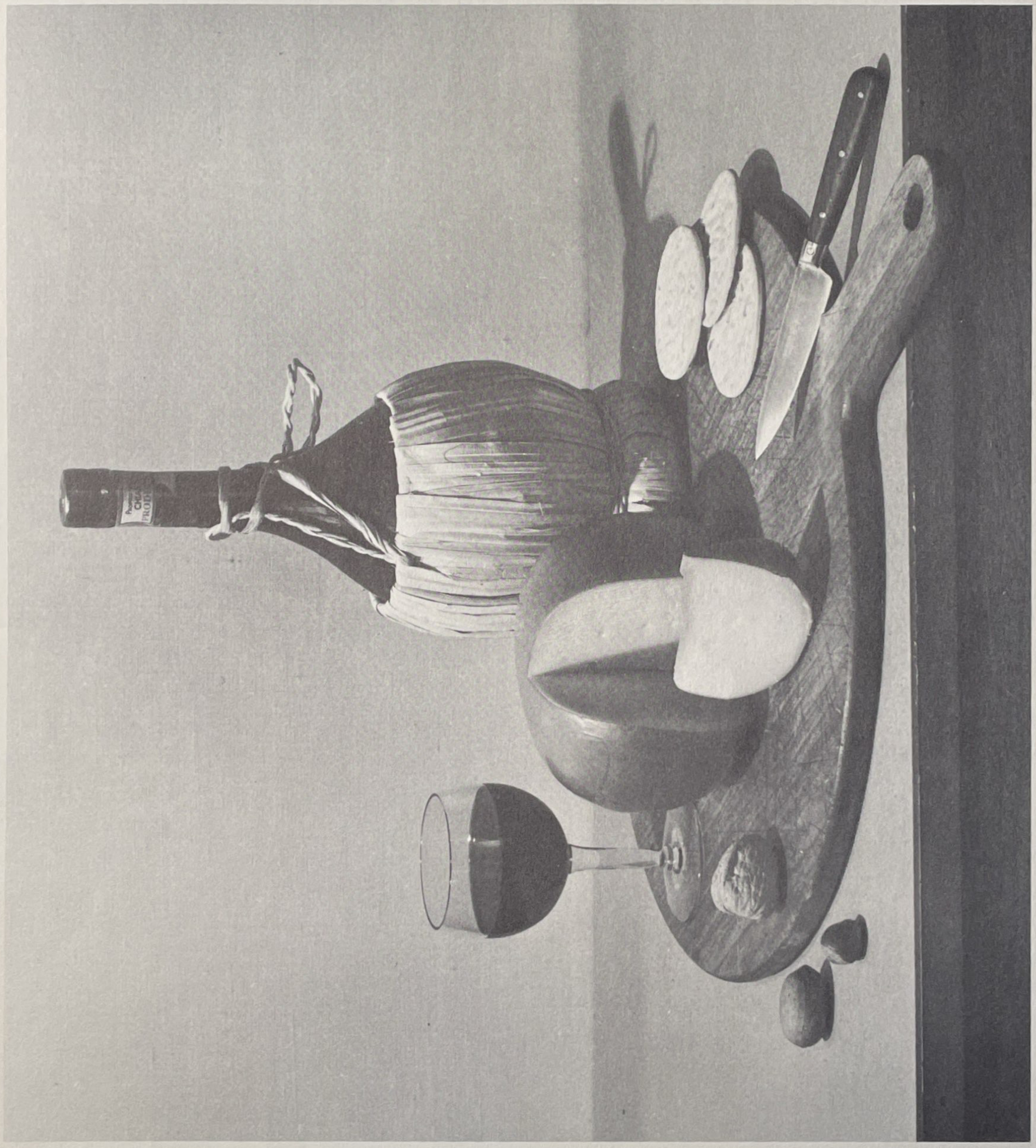

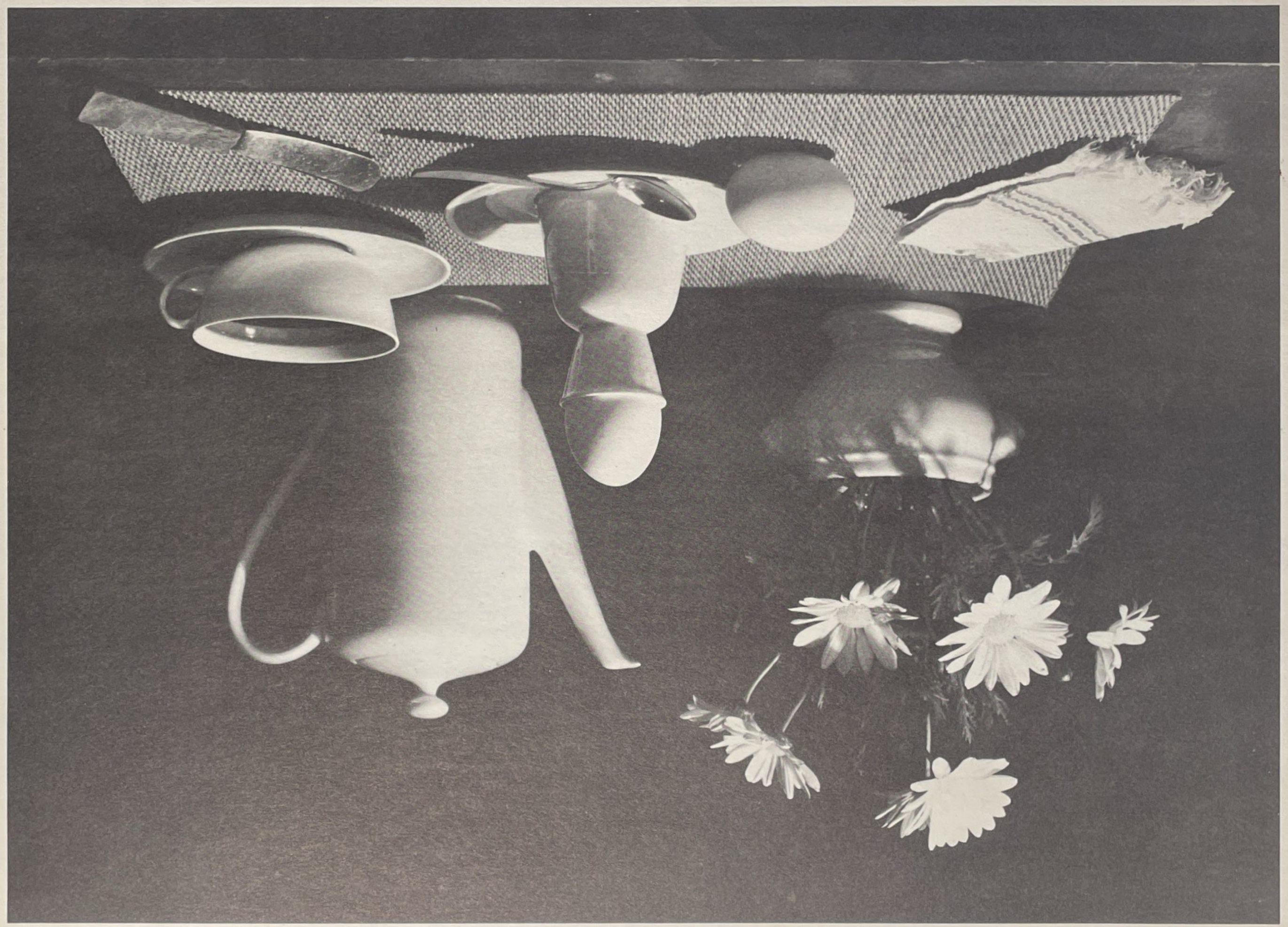

Courtesy the Barrett Division
Allied Chemical & Dye Corp.

Mood in composition—Stevan Dohanos

Mood is a transitory state of mind or feeling affected by the emotions. You conjure up a series of images that haunt your memory and influence you at the moment. All of the senses react to external sources and influences. For example, your sensory nerves can react in many different ways to colors, sounds, smells and tastes. In the art of picture making, of course, we are only involved with the visual senses.

For instance, the blackness of night can inspire a mood of fear and apprehension which in turn can be completely dispelled by the warmth and security of sunshine.

The accompanying painting, in which I have endeavored to create the mood of a haunted house, utilizes several devices to increase the mood desired. Searching for an actual haunted house was not entirely practical at the time I did this assignment, although I did drive around the surrounding area for several hours looking for such a place. Eventually I was forced to sketch a house in good condition, and adapt it myself.

I first selected a house with a mansard roof because that style of architecture lent a note of antiquity. I felt that it would heighten the mood of the painting to suggest architecture at least two or three generations old, thereby throwing the thought patterns of an observer conveniently into the past. I felt that it would add drama to my picture to show this house abandoned, neglected and in an isolated position. The weeds and grass should overrun the place with the elements having taken over completely. The results therefore, would be one of general decay, a forbidding, "no trespassing" atmosphere. The other mood-heightening devices which I felt it necessary to inject were:

A Widow's Walk atop the roof which suggests the long, lonely waiting of the separated spouse.

Scarred and wind-swept trees that in their very stylized form suggest arms and hands outstretched in horror.

The fallen limb to suggest the force of the winds.

The loosened and banging shutters with one of them having fallen to the ground.

The weathered and decayed clapboard and the fallen roof tile.

The nearby graveyard to lend the ominous quality of departed spirits.

The bats flying around the chimney.

All of these devices were then dramatically shown in one vivid flash of lightning before being plunged again into total blackness. Black and white was sufficient for color on this painting since an average person would not be conscious of any other colors in such a situation. The house, therefore, was composed from detailed sketches of several buildings. The trees were sketched at another place and re-designed to fit the space and allow the house to be prominently and compellingly displayed. Of course the mood created in this picture is one of the most extreme an artist would attempt to paint and the symbols and devices are obvious. However, this illustrates, by using standard, heightening devices, how you can create mood in any given situation be it gay or somber. Remember to capitalize on the chain of images that the basic subject inspires within your mind.

EDWARD HOPPER
Early Sunday Morning
Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

BEN SHAHN
Hunger
Courtesy Alabama Polytechnic Institute

VINCENT VAN GOGH
The Starry Night
Collection, the Museum of Modern Art, New York
Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest

Some thoughts on putting our feelings into pictures

Knowing what our senses and emotions can contribute to our pictures is one thing. Being able to transfer these feelings to paper is quite another. We must be able to convey our emotional reactions in visual terms – through the right choice and arrangement of lines, tones, textures, and shapes.

The three paintings on this page are excellent examples of how this can be done. Edward Hopper creates a real sense of quiet in the first picture, which shows a city street on Sunday morning, with the low light striking the buildings. There is not a car or a person to disturb the silence. To strengthen the mood, the artist has placed emphasis on horizontals and verticals. Diagonals are hard to find here.

Few artists have expressed the tragedy of hunger with greater pathos than Ben Shahn does in his picture of the starving boy. The child reaches a bony hand right out of the picture to us. His greatly enlarged head makes his body seem even more wasted by famine and malnutrition. This skillful exaggeration of perspective, combined with the artist's sensitive drawing, creates a deep feeling of compassion in the viewer.

In "The Starry Night," rather than showing the literal appearance of the night sky, Van Gogh portrays the intense, almost religious feelings it inspired in him. The forms of the cypress trees in the foreground suggest tongues of flame leaping upward. The whirling stars overhead make us feel an endless motion and excitement in the heavens. We sense that the sky and the forms of nature were a source of constant wonder to the artist.

In each of these pictures the visual means the artist used to communicate feeling seem simple and obvious. These means, however, no longer appear so simple when we try to apply them ourselves. We may be intensely interested in our subject – we may feel it deeply and experience it with all our senses – and still find real difficulty in expressing these feelings in a picture. Why and how this can happen we shall examine here.

Let's take, for example, the case of a beginner who wants to make a picture showing the noise and confusion of a busy city street. Quite correctly, he goes right to the scene to get to know his subject firsthand. He is jostled by the crowd, he listens to the roar of the traffic, he smells the exhaust gas, and soaks up every other sense impression he can. Then, excitedly, he makes sketches and takes photos of significant things. Home he goes now, to work on his picture, hoping that it will stir in all who see it the same emotions and reactions he himself has felt.

His picture, finished, falls far short of his expectations. It is technically well drawn – but it does not communicate feeling, the sense of hubbub and confusion. Nor, for the life of him, can he imagine why.

What happened to our artist has happened to many an artist before him. As soon as he began to draw, his whole concern shifted from feeling and experiencing to seeing – seeing, isolated from his other senses. Everything he did now was an effort to duplicate just the look of the scene. The smells, the sounds, the excitement were forgotten, and his attention was riveted on whether the buildings were in proportion and the details accurate, whether the cars and people were the right size and his perspective absolutely correct. These, of course, are all very important points – but they should represent just one part of the artist's concern.

Our artist, to record his feelings in a picture like this, should have asked himself questions such as these: Do these people fill enough space? Are there enough of them – are they really close together – and, above all, are they designed into a shape that conveys a sense of movement? Would more cars suggest the sounds of a busy city street better? Would the buildings contribute more if they were broken up into exciting patterns of light and dark? Questions like these would help any artist keep in view his goal of expressing his feelings in pictorial terms.

This section, along with our earlier one on the principles of composition, shows you how to express your ideas in pictures. Your job now is to take these specific principles and use them to express the emotions and sense impressions your subject produces in you. To do this successfully will take time, practice, and, above all, thought. It does for any artist – even highly skilled artists like the members of your Faculty. But, as the work of these Faculty members demonstrates, with perseverance and careful planning you can achieve your goals just as they do, and create pictures that communicate real feeling to the viewer.